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ABSTRACT

The need for trained counselors/counseling psychologists, and for counselor education, training, and accreditation, are topics of continued discussion within professional organizations, accrediting bodies, universities, and other training institutions. Following an exploratory meeting in 1998 to discuss the need for additional graduate counselor education in Alberta, an advisory committee was formed with representatives from Alberta universities and major stakeholder groups. This paper describes an innovative approach to inter-university collaboration in the delivery of graduate programming emerging from that initiative. The initiative works on the premise that the current model of graduate education must be changed to reduce the barriers to continuing professional development. The new graduate program in counseling has a two-stage process. The first stage focuses on the fundamentals of counseling theory and practice. In the second stage, students select relevant assessment and intervention modules and develop an area of counseling specialization. The program is a learner-driven delivery system within the context of adult education and professional development. Through this collaboration, the needs of students can be better served while maintaining high standards of academic excellence and professional practice. (JDM)

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Campus Alberta: A Collaborative, Multi-University Counsellor Training Initiative

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Introduction

The need for trained counsellors/counselling psychologists, and for counsellor education, training, and accreditation, are topics of continued discussion within professional organizations, accrediting bodies, universities, and other training institutions. Some of the key issues include the need for further counsellor education programming; the type of programming and modes of delivery that will best meet that need; and the inter-relationships of counsellor education programs across universities.

In November 1998, an exploratory meeting was hosted by Athabasca University to discuss the need for further graduate counsellor education in Alberta and possible ways for counsellor educators and other stakeholder groups to collaborate in the development of needed programming. Out of that initial meeting, an advisory committee was formed with representatives from Alberta universities and major stakeholder groups. The advisory committee adopted the name Campus Alberta: Counsellor Education Initiative to emphasize the collaborative nature and provincial scope of their vision. This paper describes the innovative approach to inter-university collaboration in the delivery of graduate programming emerging from this initiative.

The Challenge Facing Counsellor Educators

Current counsellor education programs are unable to meet market demands for professional training. In Alberta, the ratio of applicants to available spaces averages 8 to 1, with many qualified applications turned away each year. The restricted access is the result of admissions criteria and program quotas, as well as singular and traditional modes of delivery and programming inflexibility. At the same time, there are many professionals working in education, career development, human services, and other fields who are doing some form of counselling and would benefit from formal upgrading. Many of these people are unable to make the lifestyle adjustments required to further their professional training through the current traditional programs. As a result, many Albertans are opting to complete graduate training in the United States or through U.S. universities offering distance programs in Canada.

To assess the need for further graduate programming in Alberta, a comprehensive market analysis was conducted. The vast

majority of the 800 respondents were seeking accessible, flexible, distance delivered graduate programming that would allow them to continue working while upgrading their qualifications (Collins, Hiebert, Magnusson, and Bernes 2001). Very few respondents felt that the current Alberta graduate programs met their needs. Respondents cited increased employability, personal interest, and greater workplace autonomy as key reasons for pursuing further education. The primary barriers identified were personal and family responsibilities, financial limitations, and the inability to leave current employment.

In addition, while there is a higher concentration of counsellors/psychologists in urban centres, there is a need for qualified professionals in rural areas. Clearly this need will not be met through the traditional counsellor education programs. About 35% of market analysis respondents were from rural areas (populations of less than 10,000); another 26% were from mid-size centres (10,000–250,000). Not surprisingly, while urban dwellers expressed some willingness to travel to a university site (three weekends per term, or once a week), those in rural areas identified only distance methods of delivery as viable options. Thus, there was substantial incentive to develop an alternative to traditional modes of counsellor training.

Joining Forces to Meet Identified Community and Professional Needs

The market analysis and subsequent consultations clearly indicated that changes in current models of graduate education were required to reduce the barriers to continued professional development and career advancement that counsellors face. The vision that emerged was for a "made-in-Alberta" program for adult learners, with open access to courses across Alberta, through various modes of delivery. Three universities in Alberta agreed to collaborate to bring this vision to fruition: Athabasca University, the University of Calgary, and the University of Lethbridge.

This collaboration was fuelled by a collective desire to enhance the accessibility, flexibility, and responsiveness of graduate counsellor education. The program will be offered onsite and through distance delivery, drawing on the combined resources and strengths of the three universities. Students will have the option of completing courses through any of the participating

universities. The goal is to provide students who face barriers to completing degrees through traditional programs, with the opportunity to further their education and to attain professional certification.

Principles and procedures of collaboration

Collaboration means different things to different people. The Webster's II New Riverside Dictionary (1984, 139) offers two definitions of the term *collaborate:* "1. To work with others 2. To cooperate with an enemy that has invaded one's country." In higher education circles, competition for enrolments and limited human and financial resources often push individuals and institutions into a mindset that fits best with the latter definition. Even when universities join forces to address a particular problem, such alliances are often plagued by turf wars, skepticism, and elitism.

Furthermore, simply agreeing to work together on a project does not create a true collaboration. How often is one invited to be part of a collaboration where the leader had everything figured out ahead of time and simply wanted everyone to agree with that idea? People still may agree to work together, but a true collaboration has not developed. What makes this particular initiative unique is the degree to which collaboration across faculties and institutions has been truly established. Inherent to this deeper level of collaboration are a shared vision of goals, a common understanding of the tasks needed to reach goals, and a solid foundation of mutual trust and respect. These are the characteristics of a working alliance (c.f., Gelso and Carter 1994; Hiebert 2000; Kivlighan and Schmitz 1992), a construct that we find very relevant to collaborative endeavours.

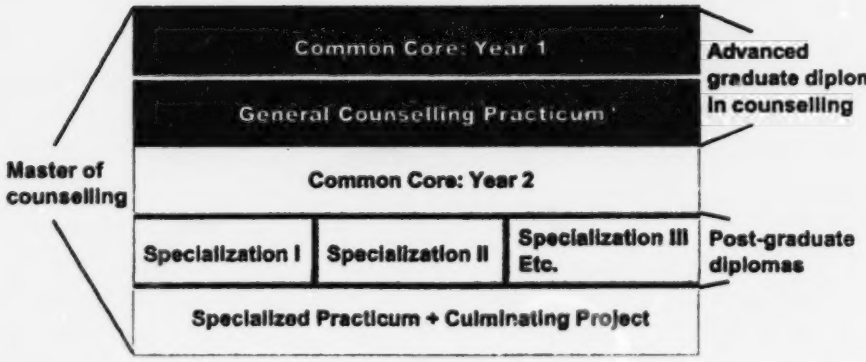
A number of other characteristics have been essential to the effectiveness of this collaboration, including: mutual payoffs and rewards, equal value placed on contributions of various participants, a shared value system, shared decision-making processes with an emphasis on consensus building, a foundation of similar or complementary professional and social strengths, diverse membership and the encouragement of multi-disciplinary efforts, and leaders who are ready to restructure for change (see Frank and Smith 1997; Kivlighan and Schmitz 1992; Meara and Patton 1994). Our experience shows that in a true collaboration, the partners together decide what goals they will target, how they will go about meeting those goals, what they will use as evidence that the goals have been met, and

how the rewards will be shared. Collective decision making is the hallmark of a true collaboration.

The Collaborative Alberta Graduate Program in Counselling

The Collaborative Alberta Graduate Program in Counselling is set to open its doors to students in January 2002. Conceptually, the program will be a two-stage process (see figure below). The first stage focuses on the fundamentals of counselling theory and practice (theory, skills, diversity, ethics, and a general counselling practicum). In the second stage, students select relevant assessment and intervention modules and develop an area of counselling specialization. We envision cross-listing the assessment and intervention modules as continuing educational offerings with the provincial psychological association and other professional bodies, to enhance the training opportunities of all practitioners in the field. The following specializations will be phased in over the first few years: counselling psychology, career counselling, school counselling, counselling women, rehabilitation counselling, and health studies. Discussions are also underway to add art therapy and music therapy specializations.

A unique feature of the program, which is a direct response to community needs, will be the creation of post-graduate diploma programs in each area of specialization. They will be designed for professionals who already have a master's degree in counselling or psychology and wish to pursue further training in a particular area. Currently, there is no formal educational route for people with a master's degree to obtain specialized training in a particular aspect of counselling. The post-graduate diploma programs will fill this need.



Mode of delivery

A challenge facing counsellor educators is how best to provide programming that is accessible, responsive, affordable, and of high quality. In particular, the issue of maximizing accessibility for students raises the need to explore alternative modes of program delivery. At the same time, the facilitation of critical thinking and exchange of ideas among academics and students remains a key feature of graduate-level education. With the current innovations in program delivery, students can be provided with a highly challenging and interactive learning environment and yet be offered flexibility in terms of when and where learning occurs and the opportunity to continue with their employment. The use of innovative learning technologies provides one such opportunity. The challenge is to optimally balance student access, quality of instruction, and fiscal/human resources.

The Collaborative Alberta University Graduate Program in Counselling will feature a flexible, learner-driven delivery system within the context of adult education and professional development. Students will have access to courses at a distance and to on-campus courses across the participant universities. Reciprocally, students in on-campus programs will have greater flexibility by being able to choose to take distance courses, for example, when a course conflicts with work hours or child care. The program will incorporate some (or all) of the following delivery components, depending upon the individualized program components that students choose: on-line instruction, teleconferencing, videoconferencing, traditional classroom instruction, face-to-face remote delivery, and summer institutes. An example of the process of inter-university collaboration was the manner in which course content was developed. Course outlines from each university in Alberta were reviewed collectively and new syllabuses developed from the best features of each university's courses.

The program will begin on a cohort model, with new student intakes each January. Students may, however, pace the completion of their program to suit their own schedules. In the first summer, students will participate in a three-week summer institute to facilitate the development of social support, interaction among learners and between learners and instructors, development of basic counselling skills, and integration with the profession. The counselling skills and professional ethics courses will be completed in this format.

All courses will be designed on a competency-based model, through internal and external consultation, to ensure that students have a solid foundation for professional practice. Work-based assignments, particularly in the specialization courses, will facilitate the integration of theory and practice.

Both the general and the specialized practicum may be completed at the student's current place of employment, provided that suitable arrangements for supervision can be made and appropriate opportunities for practice exist. The final component of the program will be a special project that will require students to demonstrate depth of knowledge and understanding of the discipline, as well as their particular area of specialization.

Taking Inter-University Collaboration to a New Level

It is not unusual for university programs to share courses and even to collaborate in offering components of a particular program. However, the governance model of the Collaborative Alberta University Graduate Program in Counselling takes collaboration to a new level by integrating and sharing all components of program development, implementation, and administration across the three universities. The program will be administered by a central coordinating committee, composed of one or two representatives from each participating university. The program will operate on a full-cost recovery basis. The revenues generated will be used to pay for direct costs associated with the program and to support faculty and staff positions at each of the universities.

Students will be admitted to the program through joint admissions. Responsibility for all program components, administrative functions, and services will be divided among the partner institutions to maximize the efficiency and cost effectiveness of the program and to provide seamless program delivery to students. The current plan is for the central administration to be housed at the University of Lethbridge. Athabasca University will be responsible for developing the learning technologies employed within the program and provision of technological support to students. The University of Calgary will provide the registry and library services. Other program functions and roles will be distributed among the partner institutions as the program implementation unfolds.

A centralized system will be established for on-line course delivery, circulation of information on course scheduling, and registration to ensure internal consistency and transparency of program components. Equivalency of courses will be established across all participant universities. Responsibility for delivery of program components will be shared among the participant universities. All courses and curriculum materials generated for the program will remain the joint property of the collaboration.

Perhaps most significantly, the vision is that students will be granted a joint degree from the participant universities. The parchment will bear the crest of all three institutions. Each university will get credit for one-third of the graduates through the program. As a result of this level of collaboration, students in the program will not only have access to faculty and other resources from across the entire province of Alberta, but they will benefit from the combined efforts of three graduate academic units in all areas of program design and delivery. There will also be considerable spin-off benefits for the on-campus programs in Alberta, as students and faculty gain access to courses and other resources through the joint initiative.

Reaping the Benefits of Collaboration

One key measure of success in any collaboration is that all feel that they are contributing to and deriving benefit from it. Clearly, in this initiative we are doing things together that we could not do separately. It is unlikely that a program of this magnitude would have emerged from any single university department, particularly with this level of support from the stakeholder community and the government. There is clearly value added for the time spent working collaboratively. One benefit of this process is that an accepted standard of counsellor training is emerging in Alberta that will affect not only this new initiative but also the traditional university programs.

For true collaboration to occur, participants must trust each other and develop confidence that people can be counted on to keep their promises. Often, this means establishing clear ground rules for participation and creating an explicit decision-making and project management process that fosters openness and investment by all parties. The creation of this joint program in counselling is clear evidence that barriers to inter-university collaboration can be overcome, if clarity of purpose, and honest

intent to support the goals and needs of all parties, can be established from the outset.

There are also other, very concrete benefits to collaborating in this way. This initiative has recently received federal and provincial funding to increase the number of graduate students spaces in counselling and in counselling psychology—the largest increase in the history of the profession in Canada. Our intention is to begin with an intake of 60 students in January 2002 and grow to an annual intake of 120 students over the next four years. The program will support nine new faculty positions across the three universities in the next few years, along with a network of adjunct faculty and field supervisors. This will increase by 60% the number of counselling psychology faculty in Alberta and will open the door to other opportunities for research, community services, and professional training. It was the collaborative nature and innovative delivery structure of the initiative that drew the attention of funding bodies.

Strategic planning, both at university and government levels, places increasing emphasis on the need for judicious collaboration among universities to maximize service to students and increase accessible programming. Creating such partnerships is an important strategy for maintaining financial viability while ensuring program excellence. The current provincial mandate in Alberta reflects many of the key principles that form the foundation of this collaborative initiative (Ministry of Learning 1999):

Collaboration fosters excellence in teaching, learning, and research. It gives us more flexibility to provide learning where and when it is needed. Partnering avoids unnecessary duplication, and uses limited resources wisely... We need our institutions to compete with the world, not with each other. We need to ensure that Albertans have access to quality lifelong learning, and a variety of delivery options... Institutions need to keep their distinctive character and program strengths, but they cannot be all things to all people. They must acknowledge each other's strengths and work together to deliver the best programs and services.

The confirmation of funding for this program is evidence of the fit between the proposed program and the provincial educational philosophy. This is the only program in Alberta that actually provides the kind of seamless, fully integrated,

collaborative programming that the "Campus Alberta" concept advocates.

Through this initiative we hope to offer ease of access and increased flexibility for students wishing to further their education in counselling, as well as reduced costs to students who won't have to leave their paid employment, relocate, travel, or pay U.S. tuition fees. There are other benefits that are worth highlighting. The cost-recovery and decentralized model provides potential for a greater range of delivery options and a larger pool of specializations. Regional complementarity of programming is made possible along with the means to address capacity issues in current programs. Students in both on-campus and distance programs will have access to courses at any one of the participating universities, through various modes of delivery. There are reduced costs for development and mounting of the program for all institutions involved and increased resources to support the highest quality academic programming and professional training.

The Campus Alberta: Counsellor Education Initiative is an exciting innovation in counsellor education, unique in Canada. Through collaboration, we will better meet the needs of students while concomitantly maintaining high standards of academic excellence and professional practice. In the process, we have also opened up new niche training opportunities, further broadening learning opportunities across the province. It has truly been a "win-win" experience! We anticipate that this program will provide a useful template for future collaborations in other academic areas.

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